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## THE VALUE OF GREECE TO THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD

By PROFESSOR GILBERT MURRAY, Oxford University

### PART II

LET us resume this argument before going further: We start from the indisputable fact that the Greeks of about the fifth century B. C. did for some reason or other produce various works of art, buildings and statues and books, especially books, which, instead of decently dying or falling out of fashion in the lifetime of the men who made them, lasted on and can still cause high thoughts and intense emotions. In trying to explain this strange fact we have noticed that the Greeks had a great and pervading instinct for beauty, and for beauty of a particular kind. It was a beauty which never lies in irrelevant ornament but always in the very essence and structure of the object made. In literature we found that the special beauty which we call Greek depends partly on the directness, truthfulness and simplicity with which the Greeks say what they want to say, and partly on a special keenness and nobility in the language, which seems to be the natural expression of keen and noble kinds. Can we in any way put all these things together so as to explain them—or at any rate to hold them together more clearly?

An extremely old and often misleading metaphor will help us. People have said: "The world was young then." Of course, strictly speaking, it was not. In the total age of the world or of man the two thousand-odd years between us and Perikles do not count for much. Nor can we imagine that a man of sixty felt any more juvenile in the fifth century B. C. than he does now. It was just the other way, because at that time there were no spectacles or false teeth. Yet in a sense the world *was* young then, at any rate our western world, the world of progress and humanity. For the beginnings of nearly all the great things that progressive minds now care for were then being laid in Greece.

Youth, perhaps, is not exactly the right word. There are some plants—aloes, for instance—which continue for an indefinite number of years in a slow routine of ordinary life close to the ground, and then suddenly, when they have stored enough vital force, grow twenty feet high and burst into flower, after which, I am sorry to say, they die—which is irrelevant. Apart from the dying, it seems as if something like that happened from time to time to the human race, or to such parts of it as really bear flowers at all. For most races and nations during the most of their life are not progressive but simply stagnant, sometimes just managing to preserve their standard customs, sometimes slipping back to the slough. That is why history has nothing to say

about them. The history of the world consists mostly in the memories of those ages, quite few in number, in which some part of the world has risen above itself and burst into flower or fruit.

We, ourselves, happen to live in the midst or possibly in the close of one such period. More change has probably taken place in daily life, in ideas and in the general aspect of the earth during the last century than in any other three or four centuries since the Christian era: and this fact has tended to make us look on rapid progress as a normal condition of the human race, which it never has been. And another such period of bloom, a bloom comparatively short in time and narrow in area, but amazingly swift and intense, occurred in the lower parts of the Balkan peninsula from about the sixth to the fourth centuries before Christ.

Now it is this kind of bloom that fills the world with hope, and therefore makes it young. Take a man who has just made a discovery or an invention, a man who is starting some great and successful social movement, a man who is writing a book or painting a picture which he knows to be good; take men who have been fighting in some great cause which before they fought seemed to be hopeless and now is triumphant; think of England when the Armada was just defeated, France at the first dawn of the Revolution, America after Yorktown: such men and nations will be above themselves. Their powers will be stronger and keener; there will be exhilaration in the air, a sense of walking in new paths, of dawning hopes and untried possibilities, a confidence that all things can be won if only we try hard enough. In that sense the world will be young. In that sense I think it was young in the time of Themistokles and Aischylos. And it is that youth which is half the secret of the Greek spirit.

#### PRIMITIVE SAVAGE ELEMENTS

And here perhaps I may meet the objection that has been lurking in the minds of many readers. "All this," they may say, "professes to be a simple analysis of known facts, but in reality is sheer idealization. These Greeks whom you call so 'noble' have been long since exposed. Anthropology has turned its searchlights upon them. It is not only their plows, their weapons, their musical instruments and their painted idols that resemble those of the savages; it is everything else about them. They were sunk in the most degrading superstitions: they practised unnatural vices: in times of great fear

they were apt to think that the best 'medicine' was a human sacrifice. After that, it is hardly worth mentioning that their social structure was largely based on slavery; that they lived in petty little towns, like so many wasps' nests, each at war with its next-door neighbor, and half of them at war with themselves!"

If our anti-Greek went further he would probably cease to speak the truth. We will stop him while we can still agree with him. These charges are on the whole true, and, if we are to understand what Greece means, we must realize and digest them. We must keep hold of two facts: first, that the Greeks of the fifth century produced some of the noblest poetry and art, the finest political thinking, the most vital philosophy known to the world; second, that the people who heard and saw, nay perhaps, even the world that produced those wonders, were separated by a thin and precarious interval from the savage. Scratch a civilized Russian, they say, and you find a wild Tatar. Scratch an ancient Greek, and you hit, no doubt, on a very primitive and awful being, somewhere between a Viking and a Polynesian.

That is just the magic and wonder of it. The spiritual effort implied is so tremendous. We have read stories of savage chiefs converted by Christian or Buddhist missionaries, who within a year or so have turned from drunken corroborees and bloody witch-smellings to a life that is not only godly but even philanthropic and statesmanlike. We have seen the Japanese lately go through some centuries of normal growth in the space of a generation. But in all such examples men have only been following the teaching of a superior civilization, and after all, they have not ended by producing works of extraordinary and original genius. It seems quite clear that the Greeks owed exceedingly little to foreign influence. Even in their decay they were a race, as Professor Bury observes, accustomed to take little and to give much. They built up their civilization for themselves. We must be grateful to the critics who have pointed out all the remnants of savagery and superstition that they find in Greece: the slave-driver, the fetish-worshiper and the medicine-man, the trampler on women, the bloodthirsty hater of all outside of his own town and party.

But it is not those people that constitute Greece; those people can be found all over the historical world, commoner than blackberries. It is not anything fixed and stationary that constitutes Greece: what constitutes Greece is the movement which leads from all these to the Stoic or the fifth-century "sophist" who condemns and denies slavery, who has abolished human sacrifice and preaches some religion based on philosophy and humanity, who claims for woman the same spiritual rights as for man, who looks on all human creatures as his brethren, and the world as "one great City of gods and men." It is that movement which you will not find elsewhere, any more than the statues of Pheidias or the dialogues of Plato or the poems of Aeschylus and Euripides.

From all this two or three results follow. For one thing, being built up so swiftly, by such keen effort and from so low a starting point, Greek civilization was, amid all its glory, curiously unstable and full of flaws. Such flaws made it, of course, much worse for those who lived in it; they

hardly make it less interesting or instructive to those who study it. Rather the contrary. Again, the near neighborhood of the savage gives to the Greek mind certain qualities which we of the safer and solidier civilizations would give a great deal to possess. It springs swift and straight. It is never jaded. Its wonder and interest about the world are fresh. And lastly there is one curious and very important quality which, unless I am mistaken, belongs to Greek civilization more than to any other: to an extraordinary degree it starts clean from nature, with almost no entanglements of elaborate creeds and customs and traditions.

#### GREEK CULTURE STARTS CLEAN FROM NATURE

I am not, of course, forgetting the prehistoric Minoan civilization, nor yet the peculiar forms—mostly simple enough—into which the traditional Greek religion fell. It is possible that I may be a little misled by own habit of living much among Greek things and so forgetting through long familiarity how odd some of them once seemed. But when all allowances are made, I think that this clean start from nature is, on the whole, a true claim. If a thoughtful modern European or American wants to study Chinese or Indian things, he has not only to learn certain data of history and mythology, he has also to work his mind into a particular attitude, to put on as it were spectacles of a particular sort. If he wants to study mediaeval things, if he take even so universal a poet as Dante, it is something the same. Curious views about the Pope and the Emperor, a crabbed scholastic philosophy, a strange and to the modern mind rather horrible theology floating upon the flames of Hell: he has somehow to take these into his imagination before he can understand his Dante. With Greek things this is very much less so. The historical and imaginative background of the various great poets and philosophers is, no doubt, highly important. A great part of the work of modern scholarship is now devoted to getting it clearer. But on the whole, putting aside for the moment the possible inadequacies of translation, Greek philosophy speaks straight to any human being, who is willing to think hard, Greek art and poetry to any one who can use his imagination and enjoy beauty. He has not to put on the fetters or the blinkers of any new system; he has only to get rid of his own—a much more profitable and less troublesome task. But at any rate we have not to do much more, when once we have got free.

This particular conclusion may be disputed, though few will dispute the general closeness to nature of Greek civilization and art. But the point presents difficulties and must be dwelt upon.

In the first place it does not mean that Greek art is what we call "naturalist" or "realist." It is markedly the reverse. It is severe in its rules and conventions. But convention in art is a totally different thing from conventionality in thinking. Art itself is in the nature of fiction or make-believe, and the convention is a kind of help in the make-believe. There is no more insincerity in using a high conventional art-form than there is in writing a sonnet. The most puzzling conventions in Greek art are those of tragedy. Greek tragedy depends externally

on a mass of traditional conventions; but, granted the convention—the metre, the religious masks, the long speeches, the chorus, etc.—all that is inside that shell is true and close to nature, and an average lover of poetic drama can appreciate it without difficulty. Again, the language of Greek poetry is markedly different from that of prose, and there are even clear differences of language between different styles of poetry. And further, the poetry is very seldom about the present. It is about the past, and that an ideal past. What we have to notice there, is that this kind of rule, which has been usual in almost all ages of poetry, is apparently not an artificial or arbitrary thing but a tendency that grew up naturally with the first great expressions of poetical feeling.

#### VARIETY AND MANY-SIDEDNESS OF GREEK THOUGHT

Furthermore, this closeness to nature, this absence of a unifying or hide-bound system of thought, acting together with other causes, has led to the extraordinary variety and many-sidedness which is one of the most puzzling charms of Ancient Greece. Geographically it is a small country with a highly indented coast-line and an interior cut into a great number of almost isolated valleys. Politically it was a confused unity made up of numerous independent states, one walled city of a few thousand inhabitants being quite enough to form a State. And the citizens of these States were, each of them, rather excessively capable of forming opinions of their own and fighting for them. Hence in politics much isolation and faction and general weakness, to the great loss of the Greeks themselves; but the same causes led in thought and literature to immense variety and vitality, to the great gain of us who study the Greeks afterwards. There is hardly any type of thought or style of writing which cannot be paralleled in ancient Greece, only they will there be seen, as it were, in their earlier and simplest forms. All the things that seem most un-Greek can be found somewhere: voluptuousness, asceticism, the worship of knowledge, the contempt for knowledge, atheism, pietism, the religion of serving the world and the religion of turning away from the world: all these and almost all other points of view one can think of are represented somewhere, records of that one small people. And there is hardly any single generalization in this chapter which the author himself could not controvert by examples to the contrary. You feel in general a great absence of all fetters: the human mind free, rather inexperienced, intensely interested in life and full of hope, trying in every direction for excellence or satisfaction for what the Greeks called *aretê* and guided by some peculiar instinct toward Temperance and Beauty.

The variety is there and must not be forgotten; yet amid the variety there are certain general or central characteristics, mostly due to this same quality of freshness and closeness to nature.

If you look at a Greek statue or bas-relief, or if you read an average piece of Aristotle, you will very likely at first feel rather bored. Why? Because it is all so normal and truthful; so singularly free from exaggeration, paradox, violent emphasis; so destitute of those fascinating by-forms of insanity which appeal to some similar faint element of insanity in ourselves. "We are sick" we may exclaim

"of the sight of these handsome, perfectly healthy men with grave faces and normal bones and muscles! We are sick of being told that Virtue is a mean between two extremes and tends to make men happy! We shall not be interested unless some one tells us that Virtue is the utter abnegation of self, or, it may be, the extreme and ruthless assertion of self; or again, that Virtue is all an infamous mistake! And for statues, give us a haggard man with starved body and cavernous eyes, cursing God—or give us something rolling in fat and color . . ."

What is at the back of this sort of feeling? which I admit often takes more reasonable forms than these I have suggested. It is the same psychological cause that brings about the changes of fashion in art or dress: it is boredom or ennui. We have had too much of A; we are sick of it, we know how it is done and despise it; we want B, or more likely Z. And after a strong dose of Z we shall crave for the beginning of the alphabet again. But now think of a person who was not bored at all; who was, on the contrary, immensely interested in the world, keen to choose good things and reject bad ones, full of the desire to know and the excitement of discovery. The joy to him is to see things as they are and to judge them normally. He is not bored by the sight of normal, healthy muscles in a healthy, well-shaped body: he is delighted. If you distorted the muscles for emotional effect, he would say with disappointment: "But that is ugly!" or "But a man's muscles do not go like that!" He will have noted that tears are salt and rather warm; but if you say that your heroine's tears are more hot than fire, more salt than the salt sea, he will probably think your statement *απιθαρων* "unpersuasive," and therefore *ψυχρον* "chilling."

#### ABUSE OF COMMONPLACE EXAGGERATIONS

It is perhaps especially in the religious and moral sphere that we are accustomed to the habitual use of ecstatic language: expressions which are only true of exalted moments are used by us as the commonplaces of ordinary life. "It is a thousand times worse to see another suffer than to suffer oneself." "True love desires nothing for itself; it only desires the happiness of the beloved object." This kind of "high falutin'" has become part of our regular mental habit, just as dead metaphors by the bushel are a part of our daily language. We speak freely of "dying in the last ditch" or of "hitching our wagon to a star," and consequently we are chilled and disappointed by a language in which people hardly ever use a metaphor except when they realize it, and never utter superfine sentiments except when they are wrought up to the pitch of feeling them true. Does this mean that the Greek always remains, so to speak at a normal temperature, that he never has intense or blinding emotions? Not in the least. It shows a lack of faith in the value of life to imagine such a conclusion. It implies that you can only reach great emotion by pretense, or by habitually exaggerating small emotions, whereas probably the exact reverse is the case. When the great thing comes, then the Greek will have the great word and the great thought ready. It is the habitual exaggerator who will perhaps be bankrupt. And after all—the great things are sure to come!

The power of seeing things straight and knowing

what is beautiful or noble, quite undisturbed by momentary boredom or changes of taste, is a very rare gift and never perhaps possessed in full by any one. But there is a great rule of art, bidding a man, in the midst of all his study of various styles or his pursuit of his own peculiar imaginations, from time to time *se retremper dans la nature*—"to steep himself again in nature." And in something the same way it seems as if the world ought from time to time to steep itself again in Hellenism: amid all the varying affectations and extravagances and changes of convention in art and letters to have some careful regard for those which arose when man first awoke to the meaning of truth and beauty and saw the world as a new thing.

Is this exaggeration? I think not. But no full defense of it can be attempted here. In this essay we have been concerned almost entirely with the artistic interest of Greece. It would be equally possible to dwell on the historical interest. Then we should find that, for that branch of mankind which is responsible for western civilization, the seeds of almost all that we count best in human progress were first sown in Greece. The conception of Beauty as a joy in itself and as a guide in life was first and most vividly expressed in Greece, and the very laws by which things are beautiful or ugly were to a great extent discovered there and laid down. The conception of Freedom and Justice, freedom in body, in speech and in mind, justice between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, penetrates the whole of Greek political thought, and was, amid obvious flaws, actually realized to a wonderful degree in the best Greek communities. The conception of Truth as an end to pursue for its own sake, a thing to discover and puzzle out by experiment and imagination and especially by Reason, a conception essentially allied with that of Freedom and opposed to that of blind obedience to authority, has perhaps never in the world been more clearly grasped than by the early Greek writers on science and philosophy. One stands amazed sometimes at the perfect freedom of their thought. Another conception came rather later, when the small City States with exclusive rights of citizenship had been merged in a larger whole: the conception of the universal fellowship between man and man. Greece realized soon after the Persian war that she had a mission

to the world, that Hellenism stood for the higher life of man as against barbarism. First came the crude patriotism which regarded every Greek as superior to every barbarian; then came reflection showing, that not all Greeks were true bearers of the light, nor all barbarians its enemies; that Hellenism was a thing of the spirit and not dependent on the race to which a man belonged or the place where he was born: then came the new word and conception "humanity" or "manness" *ἡθροσύνη*, *humanitas*, which made the world as one brotherhood. No people known to history clearly formulated these ideals before the Greeks, and those who have spoken the words afterwards seem for the most part to be merely echoing the thoughts of old Greek men.

These ideas, the pursuit of Truth, Freedom, Beauty, are not everything. They have been a leaven of unrest in the world; they have held up a light which was not always comforting to the eyes to see. There is another ideal which is generally stronger and may, for all we know, in the end stamp them out as evil things. There is Submission instead of Freedom, the deadening of the senses instead of Beauty, the acceptance of tradition instead of the pursuit of Truth, the belief in madness or passion instead of Reason and Temperate Thought. If something of this kind should prove in the end to be right for man, then Greece will have played the part of the great wrecker in human history. She has held up false lights which have lured our ship to dangerous places. But at any rate, through calm and storm, she does hold her lights; she lit them first of the nations and held them during her short reign the clearest; and whether we believe in an individual life founded on Freedom, Reason, Beauty and the pursuit of Truth, and an international life aiming at the fellowship between man and man, or whether we think these ideals the great snares of human politics, there is good cause for some of us in each generation at the cost of some time and trouble to study such important forces where they first appear consciously in the minds of our spiritual ancestors. In the thought of art of ancient Greece, more than any other, we shall find these forces, and also to some extent their great opposites, fresh, clean and comparatively uncomplicated, with every vast issue wrought out on a small material scale and every problem stated in its lowest terms.

Gilbert Murray

